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A right  
to lie  
to us?

**T**he Reagan administration shot itself in the mouth last week when it tried to explain that a lie by another name is no lie at all.

The administration appeared to be getting off the hook by persuading the public that a proposal to launch a disinformation campaign through the press against Libya's Col. Muammar Qaddafi was merely the suggestion of a low-level operative. But then it made the mistake of trying to justify the idea of using the press to spread untruths, even while denying it had done so.

First, Secretary of State George Shultz appeared to confirm press reports that the administration had tried to unsettle Col. Qaddafi, even to the point of creating a climate for a military coup, by planting false accounts of planned terrorist acts

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and a possible U.S. military response.

While Mr. Shultz said he knew of no decision to lie to the press, a reassuring statement, he went on to say, "I think that if there are ways in which we can make Qaddafi nervous, why shouldn't we? That is not deceiving you but just using your predictable tendencies to report things that we try to keep secret, so we'll label it a big secret and you'll find out about it and you'll report it."

Then, the FBI was asked by the White House to find out who was responsible for the disinformation campaign. But the timing of the administration's indignation makes it suspect. Why wasn't the FBI asked to investigate when the report was first published in *The Wall Street Journal* nearly two months ago?

Government manipulation of the press is nothing new. It is at best a risky business; at worst, a serious threat to a society that relies on a free press to ensure its freedoms.

The reason for manipulation may be as lofty as it was in 1962 when Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Arthur Sylvester told reporters that the government has an inherent right "to lie to save itself" in a time of national peril. The speech followed the Cuban missile crisis and Mr. Sylvester acknowledged that during the crisis the Kennedy administration had manipulated the flow of news as part of its "weaponry" to force the Soviet Union to withdraw missiles from the island.

In his book, *The Missile Crisis*, NBC's then-State Department correspondent Elie Abel observed, "Sylvester later argued the national interest was better served by keeping the Russians guessing at that moment than by fully informing the American people." But that was a rare moment in history and national survival was at stake, so for a clear and limited purpose, the Kennedy administration stretched the truth to the breaking point concerning the movement of Soviet ships toward Cuba and U.S. plans for a response.

A later and not so noble stretching of the truth occurred during the Vietnam War. In 1971, the Nixon administration, in the Pentagon Papers case, went to court in an attempt to block publication by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* of government documents which, among other things, proved the American people had on more than one occasion been deceived by their own government concerning the conduct of the war.

In his opinion concurring with the Supreme Court majority which freed the newspapers to publish the documents, Justice Hugo Black said, "Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people. . . ."

The sometimes arrogant press occasionally deserves a comeuppance that forces it to drink from the well of humility, but not in this case. At stake here is the credibility of both the press and the government.

Consider this. The ombudsman for *The Washington Post*, in writing about this incident, reported that the newspaper received more com-

plaints for challenging the government with the story about the deception than it did for having been gullible in the first place.

Truth has always been America's greatest weapon, and honor her strongest shield. Attempts to get Col. Qaddafi by manipulating the press is the stuff of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Rotten as Col. Qaddafi is, a disinformation campaign only makes us smell like him. It isn't worth it.

*Cal Thomas is a nationally syndicated columnist.*